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Why Stop At A Triad?

By Stansfield Turner

WASHINGTON — The argument that the United States must preserve its triad of strategic nuclear forces is bogus.

It is bogus because it only concerns what weapons we possess, not what they must achieve.

The real issues are, What is the objective of the triad; and does it take a mix of three strategic-weapons systems to achieve it? How about two? Or maybe four?

The objective is to ensure that if one element of our strategic nuclear forces were made vulnerable, the others would be so able to retaliate that any enemy would be deterred from attacking.

The wisdom of having several strategic nuclear systems to back each other up is very evident.

In fact, one of our three systems, the land-based Minuteman missile, today is theoretically vulnerable to a surprise attack. Although that vulnerability currently is being debated, it appears that the Soviet Union has so improved the accuracy of its numerous and large land-based missiles that conceivably they could knock out most of our Minutemen in a single, large-scale attack.

Some people are questioning whether this accuracy would actually prevail in combat. Regardless of whether it will or not, there is an aura of uncertainty about whether our land-based-missile forces are adequately secure. This means that the credibility of that leg of the triad is eroding.

It is fortunate that we have strategic bombers and strategic submarines to back up this weakening leg, but what if a counter should be developed to one or

to both of these alternatives?

The United States could be exposed to nuclear blackmail. However, the argument that because of such a possibility we should retain the land-based-missile leg of the triad defies logic.

How could an already vulnerable system make up for possible future vulnerabilities of bomber and submarine systems? Certainly more Minutemen would not be a useful backup for our bombers and submarines. The MX missile would be useful only if it is likely to be more survivable than either of these other systems in the future. Is that likely to be the case?

When the MX system was designed, it had 200 missiles scattered among 4,600 shelters. Some proponents of the MX contended that with that many points to aim at, it would not be vulnerable. I believe that was wishful thinking from the beginning. It certainly is today when the current estimate is that all the Administration will approve is 100 missiles in 1,000 shelters.

If the Soviet Union has the capability to knock out our 1,000 Minutemen this year or in 1982, surely by the time we could deploy the MX the Russians could also knock out an additional 1,000 shelters.

Thus, the public should be alert to the cry of "preserve the triad" as a justification for perpetuating the most obsolete part of the triad in the form of the MX.

Instead, let us remind ourselves of the basic objective: to retain an invulnerable deterrent. If we don't feel as comfortable as we'd like with just bombers and submarines — and I don't — can we find something else?

Yes. We can rebuild the triad with cruise missiles: on land-based mobile launchers, on surface ships, and in attack submarines, as well as in aircraft, as currently planned.

But why stop at a triad? We could also shrink the MX to a size that could be transported on a road, and thus have four legs rather than three.

Whether we need this fourth alternative is a function of the sense of assurance it gives us as measured against its cost. It can probably wait until we see whether the vulnerability of the other systems increases.

The point is, yes, we probably need at least a triad, but that is not synonymous with preserving a land-based-missile system that, in the form of either the Minuteman or MX, is too vulnerable to provide assurance that our defensive posture is sound.

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